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THE NEW READING PUBLIC

A Lecture
delivered under the auspices of
'The Society of Bookmen'
by
SIDNEY DARK

1922

Published for 'The Society of Bookmen'
By George Allen & Unwin Limited
Ruskin House, 40 Museum Street, London

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FOREWORD

THE following lecture, delivered by Mr. Sidney Dark at the Essex Hall as the first of a series of lectures arranged by the Society of Bookmen for assistants and employees of the book trade, is not only so excellent but so stimulating and encouraging that an introduction cannot be necessary. But in publishing the lecture the Society desires to offer its grateful thanks to Mr. Sidney Dark, and takes an occasion for saying an explanatory word about itself.

The Society of Bookmen was founded towards the end of last year for the purpose of bringing together representatives of all the different industries that are engaged in the creation and distribution of books. Its aim is the advancement or widening of the general knowledge and appreciation of good literature; and that is its only aim. It has no grievance to redress, no axe to grind, no logs to roll. Its members comprise publishers, authors, booksellers, journalists, librarians, literary agents, etc.; in a word, people who live by books and for books. At present its membership has been restricted to a small number; but later on, when its organization has become established and when, as is hoped, the success of its activities may justify enlargement, many more members or associates will be cordially welcomed.

June, 1922

W. B. MAXWELL.

To Mr. J. M. Smith
of the
American Museum of Natural History
New York City

THE NEW READING PUBLIC

I AM told that certain highly born and impecunious persons regularly add to their income by introducing the sons and daughters of war profiteers and Chicago pork packers into those exclusive circles where, to quote W. S. Gilbert, 'dukes are three a penny.' You, whose business it is to sell and distribute books and to be asked every day for expert advice as to what are the best books to read, have a far higher and nobler vocation. It is your privilege, as Lord Haldane said the other day, to introduce your clients into the very best society, into the society of the immortals. You are Cook's guides to Olympus. A bookseller is no mere tradesman. I have known many booksellers who would far rather read books than sell them, and the literary tradition of book-selling reaches from Samuel Richardson to Bertram Dobell. A public librarian is generally an underpaid public servant, but he and the bookseller are keepers of the keys of a veritable heaven of delightful and explanatory experience.

I feel considerable diffidence in addressing an audience largely composed of men and women of such great social importance, whose privileges and responsibilities are so far reaching. My only justification is that, during the past two and a half years, circumstances have given me the chance of acquiring peculiar knowledge of the New Reading Public, of that ever-increasing company drawn from what

we commonly call the lower middle class and the working class, who have discovered that the literature of their country is a priceless possession which is their very own, and which they are as eager to read as any normal man would be to explore the highways and byways of a newly acquired estate. It is because it is your business and mine to act as guides in these great adventures that it is immensely important for us to realize the significance of the adventure and the character, the ambitions and the limitations of the adventurers. Robert Louis Stevenson says in his essays on the Profession of Letters: 'Every article, every piece of verse, every essay, every *entre-filet* is destined to pass, however swiftly, through the minds of some portion of the public, and to colour, however transiently, their thoughts.' In the days when literature was the luxury of the wealthy and the leisured, the writer's responsibility was comparatively limited, since he could only colour the thoughts of a minority, even though it were a governing minority. Now that every one can read, and great multitudes actually do read, the responsibility, primarily, of the writer, and incidentally of all of us who are concerned in the making and distributing of books, is obviously tremendously increased.

Great literature is the creation of its age and its nation. It is inconceivable that Shakespeare's plays could have been written anywhere but in England and at any time but the later Renaissance. It is inconceivable that the Dickens'

novels could have been written by any one but a middle Victorian Londoner. It is inconceivable that the Tolstoy novels could have been created anywhere but in Russia in the gloomy years that preceded the destruction of Czarism by the foul iniquities of Rasputin and the terrifying philosophy of Lenin. But while great literature is the child of one age it is the father of the next. As a nation reads, so it becomes. Let me decide what the people shall read, and you may make their laws. In saying this I am not merely referring to social and political and philosophic treatises. I am thinking of the whole gamut of a library, and particularly of works of the imagination. Again, to quote Stevenson: 'The most influential books and the truest in their influence are works of fiction. They do not pin the reader to a dogma which he must afterwards discover to be inexact; they do not teach him a lesson which he must afterwards unlearn. They repeat, they rearrange, they clarify the lessons of life; they disengage us from ourselves, they constrain us to the acquaintances of others; and they show us the web of experience, not as we can see it for ourselves, but with a singular change—that monstrous consuming ego of ours being for the nonce struck out.'

It is, of course, tragically possible for a man to be deep versed in books but shallow in himself, but he is far less likely to be shallow in himself if he is deep versed in books. Silly people talk of novel reading as a waste of time,

but to read a fine novel is a splendid employment of time; for great novels not only make priceless addition to the number of our friends and acquaintances, but they give us friends and acquaintances whom we can know far more thoroughly than we can possibly know our next-door neighbours or even the members of our own households. How infinitely better one knows Sam Weller than one can hope to know the humorous gentleman of exactly the same origin who works the lift at the office! How far better is one's understanding of Madame Bovary than of one's own skittish cousin! How much more complete is one's knowledge of Major Dobbin than of the equally dull fellow who plays bridge at the club. The intimate knowledge that we have of Sam Weller and Madame Bovary and Dobbin, thanks to the genius of Dickens, Flaubert, and Thackeray, helps us to a greater knowledge of the lift-man and the skittish cousin and the dull fellow at the club and—what is of infinitely more importance—to a deeper knowledge of ourselves.

With the help of imaginative literature the reader is able to co-ordinate his own apparently contradictory experiences, to find an explanation of the everyday mysteries of living and to discover the beauty that lies hidden—frequently very deeply hidden—in our relations with our fellows and with the universe. It is therefore evident that there is a great gulf fixed between the man who reads wisely and intelligently and the man who reads nothing but

the banal. The common ambitions of a society, all the members of which have been affected by Shakespeare and Molière, by Shelley and Keats, by Flaubert and Dostoievsky, by Dickens and Thackeray, by Tolstoy, by Swinburne, by Mr. Wells and Mr. Conrad, would differ, in every particular and all essentials, from the social and political yearning of a community nurtured on the novels of Ethel M. Dell and the poetry of Ella Wheeler Wilcox. All of us are eager to see this old world of ours, with its cruelties and its stupidities, its waste and its injustice, metamorphosized into a new world where the great dream of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity shall at last be a fact; but it is abundantly clear that the individual must suffer a sea change before society can be fundamentally altered, and I am thoroughly in agreement with Mr. Wells that salvation for the individual can be, and probably can only be, effected by means of great literature. All over the world to-day the mass of the disinherited are rebelling against the circumstances that rob their lives of colour and satisfaction and leave them nothing to do except to struggle for a bare subsistence. The rebellion is comparatively ineffective, because the majority of the rebels do not really know what they want or why they want it. They are uncultured. They may have read Karl Marx, but they have never read Shelley—and what do they know of life who only Karl Marx know? They may know something of the meaning of socialism; they have not

learned the full glory of being a man. I am fearful of dogmatism. I am disinclined to lay down any proposition without hesitating qualifications, but of one thing I am quite certain—the wider you make the area of appreciation of the masterpieces of literature, the more general genuine culture becomes, the more probable it must be that social abuses will almost automatically disappear, because these abuses are the result of narrowness of vision and selfish stupidity, and when men walk in the light they avoid the pitfalls and stand in little peril of falling into the abyss.

If my proposition be accepted, how great is the opportunity for service that lies in the hands of the writer, the publisher, the bookseller, and the librarian; how great is the privilege of opening the window to the light; how fearful is the responsibility of aiding and encouraging the distribution of books that add to confusion and darken counsel.

In his famous letter to Henry James, Mr. Wells has said that literature is a means to an end. The book that is nothing more than a series of beautifully constructed sentences has little value in the welter of our modern world. The author who writes without any thought of his readers is unlikely to have any social or even literary importance. Mr. Joseph Conrad, perhaps the most careful literary artist of his generation, says in the preface of one of his novels: 'I saw that I had managed to please a certain quantity of minds busy attending to

their own very real business.' And Conrad makes no secret of the pleasure that this fact brought to him. The mass of men lack vision. They are so concerned with their own material affairs that without help they have no inspiration, no understanding. It is the mission of the great writer to give them these things. They cannot be given unless there is the desire of the gift. I affirm that the desire exists. It exists in the sordid mining villages of South Wales. It exists in the mills of Lancashire and Yorkshire. It exists, to an amazing extent, among young men and women who work in London shops and offices. And it must be regarded as an unparalleled privilege to have some part, however small that part may be, in responding to so widespread and so inspiring a demand.

In the dedication to Pitt that precedes 'Tristram Shandy,' Laurence Sterne wrote: 'I most humbly beg, sir, that you will take this book (not for its protection, it must protect itself) into the country with you, where, if I am ever told it has made you smile or to conceive it has beguiled you of one moment's pain, I shall think myself as happy as a Minister of State.'

The modern writer has the opportunity of exciting a very wilderness of smiles and of beguiling years and years of pain. Sterne describes himself to Pitt as 'Your well-wisher and most humble fellow subject.' That is the spirit in which all of us who are engaged in the business of books should approach that New

Reading Public whose smiles are all too few and whose pain is all too frequent.

It is, of course, true that you can take a horse to the brook, but you cannot make him drink. It is natural that the inexperienced should be fearful of any new adventure. Half the people who say that they cannot read this and they cannot read that, have never tried to read either of them. The system of education common in England in public and secondary schools, perhaps even more than in the primary schools, is calculated not to stimulate boys and girls with the desire to read, but to terrify them at the idea of having to read anything more ambitious than a monthly magazine. But in spite of our schools, England is beginning to read, and the public libraries are besieged, though it still remains a regrettable fact that reading is regarded by a large number of persons as a mere narcotic, something calculated to make one forget. Books that are nothing but narcotics are, in the long run, as destructive of real life and real living as cocaine.

George Santayana says that to turn events into ideas is the function of literature. This may be taken as the test of a book, whether it is literature and therefore worth reading, or whether at the best it is a narcotic. The great fact for us to remember is this—there are real books for every individual, for every occasion, for every mood; books that the common way-faring man has only to be persuaded to read to find in them just that stimulus, just that thrill,

just that explanation which, consciously or unconsciously, are the things for which he is asking.

It is here that the bookseller and librarian can be of the most tremendous service to their fellows. Of course, the man who is to get the most out of literature is the eclectic, but the leisure of the new reading public is limited, and its curiosity is naturally restricted. Nevertheless for each individual there is at least one book that will colour and intensify individual living, and there is the book superficially attractive that will leave events unexplained, thrown into a false perspective and given false values, and that will suggest utterly wrong and misleading conclusions even if the set of circumstances which it narrates are possible and human.

So long as the people who read at all were so bored by life that their one desire was to escape from reality, so long were they absolutely and properly content to read stories, the plots and characters of which had no possible connection with reality.

The existence, and indeed the very breathing of the early Victorian young lady, were limited by a series of conventions as stifling as her cast-iron stays, and her chief amusement was to sit in her mother's drawing room surrounded by wax flowers and antimacassars, diligently working a sampler (whatever they may have been). Life to her was so unutterably dull and stupid that when she read she wanted to read

impossible love stories which always wisely finished with a marriage with a hero as handsome as a Greek god.

In the years that followed the 1897 Education Act, when servant girls had also learned to read, the Marchioness in her underground kitchen read exactly the same sort of literature as that which appealed to the sampler lady in the drawing-room. And for exactly the same reason. Life with the Marchioness, anyhow until the arrival of Dick Swiveller, was so intensely dreary and uncomfortable that the escape for life was the one thing that reading could give her.

It is an interesting fact that even now the novel is read by twenty women to one man, and the reason is rather difficult to determine. Mr. Bernard Shaw has asserted, and I think it is true, that the English, or at least the Southern English, are of all people the most romantic; and if that be so, it might be supposed that crude love romances would appeal to ingenuous English men as well as to English women. But they never have, and the love passages in popular melodrama are generally received with guffaws of masculine laughter. The reason, I think, is that while the Englishman is romantic in the sense of infinitely preferring irrational adventure to common-sense industry, and in frequently taking more interest in his back garden than in his shop, he is, so far as woman is concerned, generally a person of experience, not to be amused and deluded by the gro-

tesquely unreal, the wooing of the Greek god of the novelette, however much such wooing may appeal to the virgins of the back kitchen. While his daughters were reading the *Family Herald Supplement* the average working man contented himself with the fiction supplied by the sporting writers of the daily press. His romance was, and in many cases still is, the search for winners, an adventure in its way as perilous and, for aught I know, as exciting as the search for the Holy Grail.

Now a new generation has arisen, the second, and in some cases the third, since the beginning of compulsory education, as it is somewhat euphemistically called, a generation to which the public libraries open wide their doors and to which the booksellers offer the best books at the lowest possible price. Despite the war and despite the rise in the cost of living, this new generation is better fed and better clothed than its predecessors. Its life is still hard, in these days tragically hard, but the mass of the people have learned that living may be life, and that life may be, as Barrie says of death, 'an awfully fine adventure.' The new generation is resentful of monopoly and privilege, and while it is protesting against the finer material possessions of the world remaining in the hands of the minority it is also claiming, partly from curiosity, partly through class antagonism, partly from the yearning for a larger and fuller life, the enjoyment of that great national imaginative heritage to which, among other

people, the son of a Stratford butcher, a Bedfordshire tinker, the son of a London ostler, and a man who spent his boyhood in a blacking factory, have made such splendid contributions.

I have already incidentally referred to the probable consequences of a whole nation coming within the influence of fine imaginative literature. The public library, the public picture gallery, the municipal opera-house, and the municipal theatre are, absolutely from the utilitarian point of view, as necessary for the healthy life of a community as a sewage system and a dust-cart. It may be that a healthy mind can only exist in a healthy body, but it is certainly true that the healthy body is a poor and contemptible thing unless it is the casket of a healthy and well-developed soul. There is a passage in Mark Rutherford's 'The Revolution in Tanner's Lane' which expresses very beautifully and completely the effect of imaginative literature on the life of an unlettered but intelligent man. The man is a cobbler unhappily married, full of curiosity, whose reading had been practically restricted to evangelical tracts until a friend lent him a copy of Byron's 'The Corsair.' At once life became a new thing for him. Its sordidness was mitigated. Its happenings became colourful adventures.

There are tens of thousands of similar cobblers in England to-day expectantly ready for similar adventures. Mark Rutherford has given us a heartening description of the result of the introduction which we may make of the

simple eager man into Lord Haldane's very best society.

In making your introductions remember that the simple test of whether a book is or is not worth reading is whether or not it is instinct with some idea. It is a matter of secondary importance what that idea is, supposing it is not in evident contradiction to the collected experience of society. No man would dream of recommending a book written by a lunatic round the idea that human beings are made of glass. There is, perhaps, less hesitation in selling novels whose thesis is that adultery is a good thing in itself, and that sexual promiscuity is intrinsically desirable, though human experience proves that both these theses are as false as the lunatic's idea that our limbs are brittle and transparent. Apart from such absurdities, it is often more thrilling and more stimulating to be confronted with an idea which challenges disagreement rather than with an idea which we have no difficulty in accepting. Agree that the idea is vitally necessary and imagine that one is faced, as some of you are faced every day, as I am faced every week, with a request to recommend a book of this or that particular order. A boy wants an adventure story. Could one do better than recommend Kingsley's 'Westward Ho,' which, with all its exaggerated anti-Popish prejudice, is instinct, has a magnificent idea—that because a man is an Englishman he is properly expected to possess a larger measure of chivalry and courtesy than

the men of other nations, and that whether he wins or loses he carries with him the obligation to play the game. In these days a man would be thrice a fool who did not recognize the many evils that follow excessive and unreasoning patriotism, but the idea expressed in the phrase, 'God's Englishman,' which the late Mr. W. T. Stead derived from Kingsley, is a fine one, because it accents the fact that patriotism is far more a question of obligation than of privilege.

What could you recommend better to the girl who wants a love story than 'Jane Eyre'; because among its other qualities its author strikes at the root of two pernicious romantic illusions; first, that beauty is essential to love; and secondly, that the only love worth having is the love that never counts the cost. However inexperienced in letters a man may be, to him who loves the sea, Conrad and Stevenson can never be hard reading, and where is the man who loves the countryside who cannot read Thomas Hardy?

The New Reading Public is not affected by criticism, for criticism is in itself a literary art, and it is really no part of the professional critic's business to play the guide to the inexperienced. I cannot conceive that the delightful literary essays of Edmund Gosse could possibly be of any use to the Social and Literary Societies, largely composed of assistants in drapers' shops, that meet regularly in the vestries of Baptist and Congregational Chapels. What these people want are introductions. I would

not desire you to suppose that I wish to use this interesting occasion for self-advertisement, but the experience I continually have, as the editor of a definitely popular weekly, proves my point so completely that I may be permitted to refer to it. I recently published an article on Helen of Troy, from which I quoted from the 'Iliad' and from Marlowe's 'Dr. Faustus.' The article was immediately followed by a score of letters asking what was the best version of the 'Iliad' to read and whether there were any cheap editions of Marlowe, and I was told by two or three of the public librarians, with whom I am lucky enough to be in touch, that during the day that followed the publication of this article they had several requests for Pope's and Derby's versions of Homer.

This is one of the many instances that I could quote of the eager intellectual curiosity which most certainly does exist among the mass of the people, and which is the happiest phenomenon of our time.

The New Reading Public is eager for beauty, and has a genuine critical appreciation for beauty when it is brought into contact with it. The New Reading Public realizes the dangerous folly of ignorance. It wants to know. It wants to know the story of the past; it wants to know the truth about the present; it wants to know something of the realities of other peoples, of their dreams, of their prejudices, of their inspirations. And these can only be learned with any accuracy and satisfaction from

the imaginative literature of other nations. Most people nowadays know something of the opinions expressed in foreign newspapers, such opinions as English newspaper editors think it worth while to clip and to reprint. These quotations are generally utterly mischievous and misleading. The Englishman is led to believe that the *Echo de Paris* is France, just as the Frenchman may quite probably suppose that the *Morning Post* is England. These delusions lead to all sorts of trouble and misunderstandings—the kind of misunderstanding which, in these days, is making us realize that peace has its perils as well as war. It is in our hands to do something to persuade to what must be an entirely effective antidote for an utterly pernicious poison. The great masterpieces of the literatures of other countries are almost all available in English translations, and most of them are published at reasonable prices. Persuade this New Reading Public of ours to read the best that France and Germany, Russia and Italy, Spain and America, have to offer, and with the reading there will come a knowledge and appreciation that will make it far more difficult than it is to-day for reckless statesmen and ignorant politicians to irritate international jealousies and international resentments for their own mean ends. The only sure foundation for a League of Nations is a well-stocked library. The well-stocked library not only supplies the individual with a means of developing and fully enjoying his own life, but

it also gives him that knowledge of other peoples, living in other countries under slightly different circumstances, that is necessary to the real appreciation of the great truth that we are all members one of the other.

I pray you, ladies and gentlemen, when you take down the shutters of your shops and open the doors of your libraries, to recollect the great responsibility that is yours. Do not be too obsessed with the best sellers, use your utmost endeavour to popularize the best; for we are living in a day that is perhaps, more than any other epoch in history, the preparation for the next day. The old order has disappeared, but it has not yet given place to the new. No man can yet tell exactly what that new will be. Every man and woman now living—and few more than you—have the chance of doing something to shape that new so that the world may become the breeding-place of happiness.

And if the book distributor has a great responsibility to the New Reading Public an even greater responsibility rests with the writer, who, after all, must be the front of the offending. This New Reading Public, which is beginning to discover that life is a thing to be enjoyed and not to be run away from, is keen to discover insincerity. It is impatient of pose, and it loudly demands the truth. It is inexperienced; but how great is the offence of the writer who will deceive its inexperience. 'It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea.'

On the other hand, what a magnificent source of inspiration it should be to the writer of real imagination to realize that it is in his power to give light and leading, pleasure and inspiration to a great army of readers, eager for life in its fullest and best sense, who are necessarily during the greater part of their days, again to use Joseph Conrad's phrase, 'busy attending to their own very real business.'

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